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ABSTRACT

In order to promote professionalism and transform novice teaching assistants into capable instructors, the University of New Mexico has established a required course in "Teaching Composition." The course attempts to define institutional and departmental goals, and explore such issues in class management as organization, discipline, motivation, and plagarism. Other basics in the training of TAs include the orientation toward professional publishing, survey of major topic areas in the language arts, and the study of research on teaching methods, composition, and literature. Additionally, a section on dialects explores the implications of language diversity. Feedback for TAs is provided by direct classroom observation by an independent expert and anonymous evaluations by students. Self-evaluation by the assistants is also stressed, and an attempt is made to provide an environment within the department that encourages and acknowledges their efforts. (KS)

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The Promise and the Performance:

What's Really Basic In Teaching TAs

The awarding of Teaching Assistantships to newcomers to the profession, in addition to subsidizing potential scholars, is based on an implicit, twofold promise. There is the promise that the TAs will do a good job, that they will somehow metamorphose from novices into at least semi-professional teachers by the end of their first semester. The other part of the promise, made by the hiring institution, is that it will help the new TAs to fulfill their "promise."

There are various ways to do this, which range from highly structured supervision throughout the TAs' three or four years in graduate school, to benign laissez faire. At the University of New Mexico we currently have some 50 TAs teaching 200+ sections of freshman composition (around 5,000 students) per year; the 15 new TAs per year are responsible for around 1200 students.

Because we want to enhance the TAs' professionalism and to insure a high quality program for our large freshman clientele, we have recently introduced a substantive course, "Teaching Composition," required of all first-year TAs, combined with classroom visitation and evaluation at intervals. These we consider basic to the education of our TAs, for reasons that will be apparent as I explain the program.

New TAs of Freshman English, like their new students, approach their first classes with a mixture of hope, fear, bravado, varied knowledge of their subject matter, and many doubts about their competence. We aim, in teaching the TAs, to buoy their hopes, enhance their knowledge, improve and assess their competence, encourage their professionalization--and thereby to dissipate their fears and obviate their bravado.

First things first. New TAs, like the rest of us, want--and probably need--to know everything all at once, instead of receiving their knowledge in tidy packages dispersed at intervals throughout the semester. Yet since that's not feasible, it seems most appropriate to begin the course in Teaching Composition with the most basic of the basics--<u>an identification of the</u>

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institution's and the department's goals for the course(s) that the TAs are teaching,[1] together with the individual TAs' goals (if they are allowed any independence in course content or emphasis). Typical goals are to enable the freshmen: to read with understanding; to learn and use standard English (including grammar) clearly and effectively in either written or oral work; or perhaps, to write paragraphs or longer essays or, eventually, research papers. If the institution, or department, or teacher of the TAs has a philosophy of teaching, this should be clarified from the start, as well. Since the teacher of teachers should be a good role model, his philosophy will permeate the course anyway, implicitly or explicitly.

New TAs are most concerned about two practical matters, grading and class management. At the very beginning of the semester it is particularly helpful to spend a class session on grading. Criteria for each grade need to be identified and explained. Among the myriad possibilities, for expository or argumentative essays I use rating sheets with various sub-categories under four main headings--content, organization, style, and mechanics, each of which can be checked as to whether its use is illuminating, adequate, or deficient, and with room for individual comments.[2] By making the criteria explicit, grading becomes another systematic way of clarifying and enhancing the goals of the freshman course(s). It is helpful for both TAs and their students to be able to see, graphically, the dimensions on which their papers are being graded; making the categories explicit also helps to insure that each paper will be evaluated according to the same criteria.

Then it is beneficial to have the class rate sample freshman writings of various qualities, to discuss the rationale for awarding one grade or another, and to try to attain some consensus, so that their students will not be subject to idiosyncratic or capricious criteria. New TAs often find, to their chagrin, that they need to learn grammar, whether fundamentals or terminology, in order to grade papers accurately. They also need to learn some shorthand--the "cs," "frag," "mm," or "w" that are in Everyteacher's Kit of Cryptic Tools. Yet some cautions on moderation are in order, lest the overzealous TAs drown their students in a sea of red ink. Paul Diederich's research indicates that student writers tend to learn better if only one or two major problems (rather than a myriad) are identified in each paper. It also shows that students benefit more from positive reinforcement on what they do better than from extensive criticism of their mistakes.[3]

Devoting a portion of each class session to issues of class management is more effective than trying to explore them all at once; serial discussions can be adapted to problems that

the TAs have as they arise throughout the semester. The topics vary widely, from the philosophical to the pragmatic. Most important are the motivational, ways to stimulate the students to write well (such as sharing ideas for reading and writing assignments). We deal, too, with plagiarism (how to construct assignments that are hard to plagiarize; how to handle plagiarism); essay revision (Must students revise papers? May they revise a given paper more than once? Will they, should they, be given a new grade on each new revision?); discipline (Are late papers acceptable? If so, under what conditions? Should attendance be mandatory? How can students be encouraged to come if it isn't?). Other matters of concern to the TAs include accommodation of student personalities (How to encourage the shy to participate; how to keep the overzealous from dominating, and yet to retain their enthusiasm.); organization (How to arrange the pacing and sequence of an individual class session as well as of the semester. How to keep irrelevancies out and content in.); and classroom environment (How to arrange the seating so that each person in the room can see and hear everyone else.).

I believe that another basic in teaching new TAs (as it is in teaching any graduate course or any writing course) is to orient them toward publishing and to help them learn how to do it. If they can write something well then they've learned it well and the can, one hopes, teach it well! Consequently, I require the TAs to write up one of their best teaching ideas (whether it be a reading or writing assignment, or class discussion, or new technique, or some combination) in a format suitable for College English, College Composition and Communication, Exercise Exchange, Improving College and University Teaching (among others) and present it to the class. This requires that they become familiar with some of the available literature on teaching English. It should also help them gain some sense of belonging to the larger academic community. Through class presentations they get immediate reactions--often vociferous, at times highly laudatory, from their peers--and consequently, added pers ectives on their teaching.

I think it would also be appropriate to require the TAs to actually submit this paper (revised, perhaps, to incorporate class suggestions) to the intended journal. The act of sending it in is quite different from the act of thinking that one might do so in some indefinite future, manana being what it is. I suspect that this will impress upon the TAs more strongly than perhaps anything else except their new label of "teacher" that they are, in fact, bourgeoning professionals--for professionals publish (or at least, send out articles in hopes of publishing). It will help to convince them that they have something of their own to contribute to their new metier. It will make them consider carefully the available literature

on their topic--and, importantly, it will make them realize (as many are loath to do upon entering the class) nurtured as they have been on critical papers) that literaray criticism is not the only significant sort of scholarly publication.

These concerns lead to discussions of research on the teaching of teaching and on the teaching of composition and literature. Again, TAs need to learn what has been done, where to find this out, what can be done, and how they themselves might do it. My TAs have found many of the NCTE publications particularly helpful, especially Kitzhaber's Themes, Theories, and Therapy (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer's Research in Written Composition (Champaign: NCTE, 1963), and Larson's The Evaluation of Teaching College English (New York: MLA [1971]). The class could even consider the strategy for designing simple research projects and for writing grant proposals to fund these, either within the institution, or from foundations or the federal government, in particular the Office of Education Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education. Although this aspect of professionalization is more common in the sciences than in the arts, why not get the TAs to thinking about the source of the honey on their future bread and butter?

My TAs are required to spend about half the semester on a survey of the major topic areas basic to the study and teaching of language. Even though these may not be included in the freshman course the TAs are currently teaching, they increase one's linguistic sophistication and can be brought to bear (directly or indirectly) in the classroom if one has the knowledge to do so. In many Master's or Doctoral programs, graduate students receive minimal training (if any) in linguistics, history of the language, systems of grammar, communication theory, and related matters. "Teaching Composition" commonly enrolls some students who have never heard of the OED to a few who are capable of writing an entry or two. At any rate, whatever many of the students learn about these topics in "Teaching Composition" may well be their only formal exposure to subject matter which is nevertheless highly relevant (see Kitzhaber, p. 15).

Consequently, the TAs read one book with an anthropological-linguistic perspective, either Edward Hall's The Silent Language (1959, rpt. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1973) or Weston LaBarre's The Human Animal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955). In both they learn about the nature of language and various aspects of the relation of culture to communication, verbal and non-verbal. In Thomas Pyles and John Algeo, English: An Introduction to Language (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), a very basic book on the subject, they obtain a

brief overview of the history of the language (including some interesting material on word origins, formation, and meaning), and they survey the systems of grammar, a subject covered in greater complexity in Virginia Clark, Paul Eschholz, and Alfred Rosa's Language (New York: St. Martins's Press, 1972), the third text (all paperbacks) for the course. Language also has an excellent collection of essays on Dictionaries, and another on Dialects; we devote a week and a half to each. Part of the Dictionary session concerns comparing the several standard college dictionaries on etymology (see "O.K."); scope, content, and bias of the definitions (see "Ku Klux Klan"); identification of type of usage (slang, informal, non-standard, or whatever) and usage preferences (see the American Heritage Dictionary usage panel and the Random House Dictionary on "ain't"). We also discuss regionalisms in vocabulary and pronunciation; learning the IPA helps, though because of limited time I don't require it.

This leads to the session on Dialects, including extensive definitions of Standard English, dialects and regional variations, and levels of languages. The TAs (and their own students) particularly enjoy comparing their respective dialects and the cultural as well as linguistic implications of these. In areas of the country that have large bilingual and bidialectal populations, as New Mexico does, discussions of these topics are extremely meaningful, particularly on the issue of whether or not students should be obliged to learn and use standard English, irrespective of their origin, or whether they do indeed have a "right ot their own language. One of the TAs' three course papers must be on a substantive topic, preferably of their own immediate experience or firsthand investigation. Dialect studies have been particularly fruitful and poignant, as the following title implies: "An Analysis of Dialect Change[4] as a Result of Desire for Greater Social Prestige."

The entire course is designed to raise the TAs' consciousness of diverse areas of the subject matter they are or will be teaching, as well as to significant aspects of the profession into which they are being initiated fairly abruptly. It is as pleasing to me as it is enlightening to the TAs to see them incorporating what they've learned in "Teaching Composition" into their own teaching.

And how do I know that they do? Partly by visiting their classes, not a formal part of the course in Teaching Composition, but a basic aspect of the teaching of TAs. I or other faculty members try to visit each new TA (by prearrangement, so as not to traumatize him from surprise) after the first three weeks of the semester and then again near the end, unless the first visit has gone superlatively (which in a surprising number of instances, it has). We hope eventually to arrange for two visits per semester to all first-year TAs.

Each of the sessions visited is evaluated by the visitor (an independent expert), the TA himself, and the recipients of the teaching, the students (anonymously). The TA is rated (and rates himself) on whether his presentation is clear, comprehensible, interesting; and on other relevant matters of course content and presentation. This evaluation is unusual and particularly significant because it involves congruence or disagreement among these three points of view, rather than the single point of view that is commonly considered in such evaluations. Highly congruent ratings indicate the TA's effectiveness--or lack or it--if visitor, TA, and students all agree that the class went well--or poorly. At times the students and visitor are aware of matters to which the TA is oblivious; the evaluations then become a means of calling these to his attention. However, my impressions after reading over 1000 evaluations are that the students, whether from innocence, experience, or affection, are generally very kind to their teachers--and overlook problems which are apparent to both the TA and the visitor.

These evaluations and the visitor's overall impressions form the basis of the conference he has with the TA soon after visiting the class, and of the report for the TA's file that the visitor subsequently writes. This is also a good time to discuss a sample paper that the TA has graded. We hope to visit the more experienced TAs at least once a year, and to make the results of the final visit, or a composite of the last two visits available, with the TA's authorization, to prospective employers as a means of attesting to his proficiency as a teacher.

Also important in the education of TAs throughout their graduate schooling is the creation of an environment within the department and university that humanely encourages and acknowledges their efforts. In many large universities the TAs, underpaid, undervalued, and overworked, are isolated from the senior faculty. When they meet, if at all, it is not as colleagues but as students in the professors' classes. This rigidly structured ivory tower needs to be tipped over on its side, so that the hierarchical stairwell can become a two-way corridor, permitting meaningful access and interchange. Faculty involved in "Teaching Composition" and in visitation can certainly promote this.

Even though initially some of the TAs resent having to take "Teaching Composition" (some would like to believe that they have entered the ranks as a full professor), their general attitudes throughout the course and their third papers, describing, analyzing, and evaluating their first semester of teaching and their process of professionalization therein, indicate that many have resigned themselves to the inevitable with good grace, and have gained a great deal in

the process. Most of the new TAs (there's always the incorrigible maverick who insists on teaching surrealist painting in the remedial grammar course) approach their students with concern, consideration, and as the semester proceeds, the confidence born of actually having something of significance to say, and some knowledge of how to communicate it. Their readings in research and in professional journals, as well as their attempt at writing for one, help to enhance their sense of belonging to the profession at large.

However, the TAs' greatest moments, when the professional and the personal blend, are when they realize, through the comments and the increased knowledge of their own students, that they have transformed their own promise into performance. They have actually taught something, they have had a meaningful impact on the intellectual process of another human being who has received it with gratitude, with pleasure. That is its own reward, and the justification of our profession; that's the ultimate basic.

Footnotes

[1] Let us assume for purposes of discussion that it is the first semester of either remedial or regular Freshman Composition.

[2] See Lynn Z. Bloom and Martin Bloom, "Becoming an Effective Self-Critic," Journal of English Teaching Techniques, 1, No. 3 (Fall, 1968), 6-8; and Lynn Z. Bloom and Rebecca Wild, "A Check List for Improvement in Theme Writing," Exercise Exchange, 11, No. 2 (May 1964), 15-17; rpt. in Writing Exercises from 'Exercise Exchange,' ed. Littleton Long (Urbana: NCTE, 1975).

[3] Measuring Growth in English (Urbana: NCTE, 1974).

[4] [In Myself, My Family, and My Husband]